



Committee on Community Resources and the Northampton City Council

Committee Members:

Chair: Councilor James Nash

Vice-Chair: Councilor Alex Jarrett

Councilor Karen Foster

Councilor John Thorpe

Meeting Minutes

Date: May 18, 2020

Time: 5 p.m.

Virtual Meeting Via Zoom

1. **Meeting Called to Order and Roll Call.** At 5 p.m. Councilor Nash called the meeting to order. Present on roll call were Councilors James Nash, Chair; Alex Jarrett, Vice Chair; Karen Foster and John Thorpe.
2. **Announcement of Audio/Video Recording**
Councilor Nash announced that the meeting was being audio and video recorded.
3. **Public Comment**
Hildegard Freedman of 68 Cahill Apartments commented that she used to visit the Northampton Survival Center but was concerned about overcrowding there even before the recent coronavirus pandemic.

There being no further public comment, Councilor Nash moved to the next item on the agenda.
4. **Minutes of February 3, 2020 Organizational Meeting**
Councilor Thorpe moved to approve the minutes of February 3, 2020. Councilor Jarrett seconded. The motion passed unanimously 4:0 by roll call vote.
5. **Community Forum Featuring Updates from Social Service Providers on Pandemic Response**
Councilor Nash introduced the presentations, noting councilors had invited organizations to discuss their activities in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Guests are being asked to give an overview of their organization, describe the challenges and dire conditions they've had to address over the last few months and explain ways the community can help with their efforts.

Heidi Nortonsmith, Executive Director of the Northampton Survival Center, said it was nice to see so many friendly and familiar faces. As background, the Survival Center is a food pantry serving 18 communities throughout Hampshire County. Ordinarily, 4,100 clients are served in the course of the year and the agency distributes about 3,000 pounds of food every week day. One of the program's highlights is that it is considered a "choice" pantry, meaning clients choose for themselves what items they want. This is a cornerstone of what they do.

She organized her notes into three phases since the last few months have been a whirlwind: 1) early urgent response, 2) building the community food distribution project and 3) ramping up and settling in.

As far as early urgent response, in early March, as soon as it became clear they were facing a pandemic, center operators made the decision to begin offering clients extra food. With the goal of flattening the curve and the knowledge that staying home as much as possible was going to be helpful, they wanted to enable clients to take home as much food as possible so as to be able to stay safely in their homes. They still offered choice at that time and focused on messaging around sickness prevention; i.e. - encouraging folks to cover their cough, wash hands, etc. Those familiar with the center know it is a very lean operation; they have seven full-time staff and 370 volunteers over the course of the year, many in their 60's, 70's and 80's. The program operates out of a beautiful re-built building, but it is a very long and narrow space, making it very difficult to physically distance from each other, especially in light of bringing in 3,000 pounds of food a day. Between the fact that they had dozens of volunteers in the building each day and were feeding between 90 and 100 people, it was a very busy and very crowded space. In mid-March, they moved their distribution outside. Instead of offering choice, they had to pre-bag food, but that enabled them to bring food to clients in their cars, assuring clients' physical distance from each other and from staff. Keeping clients physically safe from a distance was one thing but volunteers were not necessarily feeling the same way. Over the course of a few weeks, over 80% of their volunteers were either feeling they needed to stay home and self-quarantine or were getting urgent requests from children across the country to no longer volunteer. A lot of new volunteers came to them eager to help but that created more crowding. On one day she is aware of, 53 new volunteers came to them in a space that probably should have held eight to 10, so it was feeling very, very jam-packed. They were moving more food, doing it more quickly and doing it with more people.

By late March, their overworked staff started to actually get physically sick, possibly related to the virus but, since testing was not available, they will never know. They enthusiastically consulted medical advisors and were told they had to assume that everybody had been exposed. With four out of seven workers no longer able to come to work, over a very short period of time it became very clear that they would need to close the building and take some time to regroup.

This moved them into phase 2, which was the community food distribution project. She recognized the presence of her good friend Alisa Klein of Grow Food Northampton, who has been intimately involved with this phase. They immediately reached out to their community partners, and two partners in particular reached out very quickly with offers of assistance; Klein and Clare Higgins of Community Action Pioneer Valley. This growing partnership grew to include the City of Northampton, Northampton Public Schools, Florence Bank, the Food Bank of Western Massachusetts, the Community Foundation and many others. Happily, just one week later – April 6th - they were able to reposition themselves as the community food distribution project.

What this looks like is that the agency now offers drive-up food distribution Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays from 12 to 3 p.m. at Jackson Street School in Northampton. Food comes directly to Jackson Street School and goes out from there so it no longer requires the bottleneck of the smaller building at the survival center. Food consists of pre-bagged, shelf-stable, refrigerated and frozen food and bountiful fresh produce. They are able to do all this from the huge cafeteria and within the circular driveway of Jackson Street School, which makes the movement of people and food very efficient and very socially distant.

Grow Food Northampton is participating in a very instrumental way by buying fresh produce from local farmers - thereby supporting local agriculture - and delivering bags of food on Tuesdays and Thursdays. The days they are not distributing food from Jackson Street School, Grow Food takes food to 11 different housing communities around town: Hampshire Heights, Meadowbrook Apartments, Florence Heights, the Lumberyard, the Pioneer Valley Worker's Center, McDonald House, Walter Salvo House, Cahill Apartments, Forsander Apartments, Michael's House and Tobin Manor.

Tuesday deliveries are timed to correspond with Northampton Public Schools' meals program, making it more efficient for families already getting food through those programs. Doorstep delivery is also available for those who register. Community Action Pioneer Valley helped them get set up at Jackson Street School very quickly and lent them a core crew of dependable staff members who might otherwise have had to be furloughed. They just started their seventh week at Jackson Street School.

With respect to numbers, they used to give out an average of about 13,000 pounds of food a week. At this point they are giving out about 17,000 pounds of food and are still very much in the growing phase. In the past at the survival center, they used to see about 2,300 individual visits a month. In the first month at Jackson Street School, they have seen 5,116 individual visits. With regard to new clients, they would typically see about 63 new clients coming to them in any given month; this first month they saw 552.

Finally, in the third stage – ramping up and settling in – they are looking at how much they might need to expand to meet the need. They've started to augment their infrastructure in the new arrangement so whatever the need is, they'll be able to meet it. They are not at capacity. "If you need food, you should be coming to us," she stressed. "Please do not think you will be taking the food away from someone else who will then go hungry. We have the food, we have the people and now we have the infrastructure."

In recent weeks, they have added a loaner van from Ford of Northampton and moved an industrial refrigerator from the warehouse at the survival center to Jackson Street School. They're giving out meat and milk and other refrigerated food. They've moved an outdoor storage unit to the premises and now have reusable crates for stacking food. Halojack has been loaned to them by their friends at Perfect Supplements. Just last week, their dear friends at DA Sullivan (who rebuilt their building 10 years ago) installed two solid ramps to help them move that 3,000 pounds of food each week.

They are giving out fresh burritos that they are purchasing from Bueno y Sano. Starting next week they will be offering nutrient-dense bone broth that they are purchasing from Belly of the Beast. They are figuring out what's next and looking at the new needs and new constraints. They are thinking that someday they will need to move back into their building and may need to retrofit it for some kind of outdoor distribution in the winter months. They are eager to expand on the partnerships they are developing now and the lessons they have learned from this experience.

For more information, she directed people to a COVID-19 specific page on the survival center's website. They do get many questions each week as to how people can be involved. Financial contributions are all they can reasonably handle right now, she advised.

Councilor Jarrett thanked Ms. Nortonsmith for her presentation. From what they are hearing it seems like they are getting enough funding for now, he observed. He asked if she thinks that will continue for the foreseeable future.

She doesn't know and doesn't think any of them know, Nortonsmith responded. Funding was very quick and generous on the individual level and from business partners. For now, they have the money to buy the food they need, she confirmed.

Councilor Jarrett asked how their organization and the city could work together further and if there is anything the City Council can do?

The city has been a great partner in all sorts of way big and small, including offering the use of Jackson Street School, providing CDBG funding and letting them break the plastic bag ban temporarily so they can get the food out, Nortonsmith confirmed. The most important thing right now is helping to spread the word about the program so people understand that they don't have to have been a survival center client before. "If you feel like you're worried about food, we're there," she assured. They have eliminated every possible barrier they are able to eliminate. "Help us spread the word," she concluded.

Councilor Foster thanked her for being there. She has truly marveled at what they've done to ramp up. She knows for people visiting the survival center, reaching out and asking for help can be fairly intimidating. She asked her to describe what people could expect when they come for the first time.

Nortonsmith thanked her for the question. During this period, employees don't have the ability to be as face-to-face welcoming as they'd like to be but, at the same time, they have almost no requirements.

Clients can come by car or on foot. Upon arrival, they will loop around and eventually come to an intake table where they will be warmly greeted by Artemis. She will ask them for their name, the number of people in their family and their address so they can add them to their database. They will be directed to drive one more car length down. They may be offered a small choice, such as pork chops or chicken or a bean and cheese burrito or chicken burrito. Then they will be helped with the food. They don't need to bring any kind of ID and will be in their car the whole time. They look forward to greeting them at their usual location after this is all over if they are still in need.

Councilor Thorpe said Heidi did a great job and pretty much answered his questions; i.e. how COVID-19 has affected their industry, whether she has seen an increase in services and how people can help.

UNITED WAY OF HAMPSHIRE COUNTY

Councilor Nash introduced John Bidwell, a representative of the United Way of Hampshire County.

The United Way primarily focuses on issues of poverty and near poverty, Mr. Bidwell presented. Even before COVID-19, 40% of their neighbors lived in poverty or near poverty, he reminded. As they can imagine, with COVID-19, the number of people who have the needs associated with poverty are only going up, so the amount of requests coming to them only going up. Over 90% of what is donated back to the community is related to those things.

The United Way concentrates on how to support agencies in Hampshire County that are tackling poverty and near poverty in a way that gives them support they cannot find elsewhere. A lot of times they're giving them funding that they can't find through grants, start-up funding for new programs and advice and connections in order to grow and advance the causes that help people in poverty and near poverty.

With COVID-19, there was a frantic rush and a huge need that grew out of that. Whereas typically United Way is a well-oiled machine, it suddenly found itself flooded with emergency requests. When the requests came in, they decided to meet them as best they could regardless of whether they came from their usual partner agencies or not.

They ended up getting involved with projects that frankly, they normally would not be involved with, but, under the circumstances, it was a dire need so they did it. He cited the emergency shelter as an example. They were approached because the people setting up the shelter were having trouble finding enough volunteers. Through its connections, United Way was able to get about 90 volunteers within the span of a week to not only open the shelter but to sustain it. They also were able to get their hands on some of the last hand-sanitizer stations and to donate them for use by the shelter. They were contacted by a few people about both Grow Food Northampton and the survival center because there was a lot going on there and an immediate response was needed. They were asked if they could make donations. They got in touch with key donors and also made grants totaling \$25,000. They were also flooded with volunteers and were able to stand up a volunteer data base.

Currently, requests are coming from three different levels: agencies not normally associated with them, partner agencies they usually support and individual requests. They are very good at finding volunteers and very good at finding resources in short order. As an example, he mentioned a woman who called in desperation because she was unable to find bladder control products. United Way members quickly located a local source for these items.

Going forward, they see the requests only increasing, he continued. They can assume that the number of people who are going to be encountering those issues is only going up.

Another concern for the agency is meeting the needs of grant requests from their partner agencies which is something they have done every single year. They are looking for funding to make sure they can fund the grants. They are also looking for extra funding because they are being asked to do more. As a result, they are looking to raise \$1.5 million this year instead of \$1.25 million.

With respect to fulfilling the grant programs, Councilor Thorpe asked if there is an on-line link to donate.

A link for donations can be found on the United Way of Hampshire County's home page, Bidwell said.

As far as volunteer opportunities, Councilor Foster asked about the balance between willing and able volunteers and the need for volunteers. Are there enough volunteers to satisfy the need or are there more volunteers than needed? She asked.

What they're finding is that the volunteer situation goes in waves. They will get a wave of people interested in volunteering and they will get a wave of need. He recommended that prospective volunteers sign up for United Way's e newsletter to find out about immediate needs for volunteers. A lot of them are for drivers. The volunteer pool has changed. Older volunteers are rightfully staying at home and college students have gone home, so the volunteer pool has shrunk. Also, volunteers need to know that they will be safe and what precautions are being taken to make sure that safety is maintained. The need goes up and down, he concluded.

SAFE PASSAGE

Marianne Winters, Executive Director of Safe Passage, thanked councilors for having her and for their interest in survivors of domestic violence, who are especially at risk these days. Safe Passage works on the impact of domestic violence on individuals and families living in the community in Hampshire County and in the hill towns beyond Hampshire County. Services include community-based services such as counseling, legal support, legal representation, children's advocacy and support groups. Clients are in some range of dangerousness around domestic violence; they may be seeing precursors or warning signs or they may be in the aftermath of an incident. Safe Passage also addresses the impact of domestic violence with an emergency shelter that serves up to six families at any one time. The other end of their programmatic services is community engagement work such as organizing volunteers, doing trainings for the general community and prevention work.

Agency staff started thinking about and taking precautions around the coronavirus very early, Winters stated. Before going remote, they did age-appropriate training sessions for every shelter guest including the toddlers. They did what they could to increase sanitation and to identify what they could do to social distance. In mid-March they essentially went remote. They have a skeleton crew – one person - in the community office, 76 Carlon Drive. Many of their clients end up using their address temporarily for correspondence such as housing and social security applications. When they went remote, counselors got in touch with all of their ongoing clients and set up remote telephone meetings. Some of them had to change their schedules since, very often when they went remote, their clients and the people they lived with who might be abusing them went remote, too. Their work in many ways stayed the same, but there are some real added risks and some changes in how they approach those in terms of safety planning. One of the most consistent things they do is safety plan with people. This means talking to them about their options, their dangerousness level, etc. When clients tell them about different situations they are facing, counselors might cite information to them from data on domestic violence to help them assess their risk and their options. Very often, one of the main options when violence escalates or warning signs grow is leaving the house, finding a neighbor or going to a mall, police station or library. Many of those options that were worked out with a person are no longer available to them. The first week, they had a training session with counselors on safety planning while in contact with an abuser. They trained their counselors on ways to talk about that, ways to acknowledge that, ways to stay safer, to signal a friend, etc.

As an example, they might talk about using a code phrase with a friend. A survivor might call and say, 'are you still delivering pizza?' and that means 'please call the police and have someone come to our house.' Also, counselors help clients think through how they might engage in self-defense in the most empowering way that they can. They have information that the most dangerous places in the home are the kitchen and the bathroom. So, if women are in a dangerous situation, counselors encourage them to try to stay away from those places that might have sharp objects, hard counters, etc. It actually may make the difference between a severe injury and a more minor injury. They also talk about having to de-escalate, which might mean apologizing for something that wasn't their fault like saying, "Sorry I burnt your meal, what can I make you?"

The nature of things they are thinking about during a counseling session has definitely changed. Their counselors are highly-trained and they have meetings with each other every day to talk through those things as they're finding that they need more case-sharing and sharing of ideas in this environment.

Safe Passage also made an adjustment to their hotline based on other available resources, Winters shared. They wanted the hotline staffed by the counselors doing the ongoing work. Their hotline is now

open and operational 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. It is reduced from 24 hours, but the substance of the session is much deeper. For off hours, they have engaged resources such as statewide and national hotlines.

In the community program, the nature of what people have to think about and what they have to plan for has changed. In addition to having to think about how to stay safer when you can't necessarily escape, people are having to think about what changes they would have to make if they get sick or if they die. This is probably one of the most heart-wrenching ways they have had to shift their thinking; having to talk about where people's kids would go if they got sick or if they had to go into the hospital and making arrangements for guardianship. People who ordinarily might be able to help may have more limitations because they are quarantining themselves or living with an elderly parent. They've taught their counselors about the legal paperwork around guardianship, wills, health care proxies, etc. They have a couple of clients who are fearful about life at home but don't want the person abusing them making end-of-life decisions. She cited this as an example of how the nature of what they're doing is different and harder and takes a lot more interaction among their counselors.

One of the dynamics of domestic violence is that people who use abuse may use a way that a person is marginalized as one tool of that abuse. An example is that, if the person being abused has a disability, the abuser may use an assistive device that helps a person be mobile as a tool of abuse, i.e. taking away a wheelchair, cancelling a personal care assistant, etc.

As sad and troubling as it sounds, the coronavirus seems to be almost another tool some people are using as abuse against a survivor, for example, not wearing a mask and saying 'well, I'm going to go anywhere I want and I'm going to bring the coronavirus home to you.' They saw this around AIDS and HIV. In their shelter, they have been working nearly constantly with the Department of Public Health (DPH) and homelessness network to envision and support changes in congregate living situations. Emergency shelters and homeless shelters are congregate living situations and they have had to really make some changes in their residential environment. They resituated everyone in the shelter into a hotel because they had more people than they could safely socially distance and then, a couple of weeks into that stay, they got thrown out because the hotel was commandeered as an isolation shelter. They are working now to put more resources toward actually getting people housed and having a different kind of screening so if people are coming to live in a congregate situation they can do some pre-screening and have some quarantine time beforehand. They are in the process of figuring that out and getting support from DPH and MEMA.

They have also been doing a lot on access to resources, finding out who is doing what differently. Staff are tracking how food distribution has changed and how the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) and homelessness resources are changing. They also have been working a lot on their own succession planning knowing full well that people may get sick, may not have childcare, etc.

Councilor Jarrett said he feels like he has so much more information now about Safe Passage and really appreciates that. He asked what kind of messaging they on the City Council can do.

They know it is not safe for some people to call them so they are trying to get information out in as many venues as they possibly can, Winters responded. They recently had an Op Ed in the Gazette. She could pass that on and if it is something the city could put on its website that would be great. They are getting a lot more hits on their website. A helpful message for someone concerned about a survivor is how to help them break their isolation. The opposite of violence very often is not necessarily lack of violence, it is connection. If someone knows somebody experiencing violence, they can arrange a regular check-in.

Councilor Foster said she has been thinking about Safe Passage and the work it is doing recognizing that it's much more challenging when people are isolated in an unsafe situation. Another thing she's concerned about is parental stress. She wondered if Ms. Winters could share any resources for parents who are dealing with their own stress.

In many ways, COVID is a perfect storm for increasing stress and for both emotional and physical abuse, Director Winters observed. She said she knows there are parenting stress lines and that some schools have set up some resources. The Hilltown community has a great newsletter for rural folks with activities and Zoom calls on different topics. A lot of time it's about connecting people with each other. Another resource she knows folks who work with parents are using are simple craft projects that can be made with things around the house. It's relatively easy to find things to occupy younger kids, but the older kids get, the more challenging it is to find age-appropriate activities to interest and occupy them, she acknowledged.

One of the things she mentioned that stood out to him is that, as a provider in the community, their network has sort of blown up, Councilor Nash observed. The 'go-to's' aren't there anymore; libraries, coffee shops and community-based programs are all closed, so they have to make a new playbook.

Finally, thinking toward the holiday season and the hot chocolate run, December is likely not going to be the time to bring together 6,500 of their closest friends for a fundraising event, Winters noted. One thing they would like to have with them are conversations about how they can have some kind of an event to meet those needs. They are also thinking about how and when to reconstitute their office. A key thing they will need is access to testing. Anything the city can do to advocate for that or push the governor in that direction would be helpful, she indicated. They had a great interaction with Northampton Fire Department around getting masks; firefighters actually arranged for the National Guard to deliver them. They were having trouble getting cleaning supplies for both the shelter and the office. Also, they have to do some renovation of both the office and shelter such as installing water coolers with sensors so less touching is required and will need funding for that.

WESTERN MASSACHUSETTS COMMUNITY MUTUAL AID

Western Mass Community Mutual Aid (www.wmacma.com) formed in reaction to the COVID crisis as a way to create networks to share goods and services and help communities become more interdependent in the face of this global challenge, Cherilyn Strader explained. Examples of projects most relevant to Northampton include neighborhood pods, of which there are quite a few. She encouraged people to check out the website. The pod's purpose is to have an organizer for a particular street or block to help residents connect with other neighbors to get groceries, get to a doctor's appointment or meet other pressing needs. Organizers have a large database that can be used if the need can't be met within the neighborhood. Another project going on in Northampton is delivery of meals. The work is entirely volunteer-driven and funded with about 15 volunteers working almost daily to deliver meals (mac 'n cheese, peanut butter and jelly, etc.). It is not a super-sustainable project since, as with everything, volunteers tend to burn out. They did receive a grant and are looking at how to distribute it. It's a way people can get involved, but she also thinks it would be great to find a way to collaborate with the city on distributing the funds.

On the topic of money, the stimulus package is not enough for most people, so they have a mutual aid fund that has been added to by grassroots donors. People can request funds through a hotline being run by the Pioneer Valley Worker's Center. They are working on figuring out a process for getting the money out. The

ideal situation would be to get money out in monthly rounds but this is dependent on how much money is received, she related.

Councilor Nash voiced his perception that, based on their earlier conversations, Western Mass Mutual Aid is not an organization providing a particular service but is an organization trying to aid other organizations. He noted that, based on a map on the agency's website, neighborhood pods seem to be well-distributed throughout the city. He agreed the pods are a great way for people to get involved in building support networks throughout their neighborhoods.

He referred to a platform called "slack" used by the people providing meals.

Ms. Strader confirmed that the website allows people to list a service or item they are willing to provide and to collaborate with other residents via 'Slack.' She responded to other questions and comments.

Councilor Jarrett thanked Cheryllyn for being a part of this. They have just started a pod in his neighborhood, he shared. He is heartened by the possibility of connection now in this time but they also established a mailing list so he thinks it will bring neighbors together beyond this current crisis as well. He helped another pod figure out who is over 65 in their neighborhood so they could reach out to each senior.

Councilor Nash thanked Ms. Strader for joining them and cited Western Mass Mutual Aid as a great resource. He asked her to reiterate how the City Council could help.

She has seen cities like Holyoke and Detroit create COVID-19 recovery task forces for residents, Ms. Strader said. She said she thought that would be a great way for the city to support agencies such as those on the call tonight.

It's important to publicize that people in need of food can send a friend or neighbor on their behalf to Jackson Street School to pick up food, Ms. Nortonsmith added.

Mr. Bidwell commented that the work Ms. Strader is doing is fantastic. He encouraged her to reach out to the United Way if they need volunteers.

With regard to the idea of a COVID-19 recovery task force, Councilor Jarrett wondered if councilors might consider talking about forming a select committee for this purpose or recommending to the Mayor that such a committee be formed at a future meeting.

Councilor Nash said he would be happy to discuss after the meeting.

Councilor Nash thanked all presenters and participants, releasing them to eat dinner, walk the dog, etc. He said he regretted not putting a discussion of future meetings on the agenda. He'll be reaching out to members to discuss repeating some of this at their next meeting and possible variations on this theme.

6. **New Business**

None.

7. **Adjourn.** Councilor Foster moved to adjourn the meeting; Councilor Thorpe seconded. The motion was approved on a roll call vote of 4 Yes, 0 No. The meeting was adjourned at 6:24 p.m.

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